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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: SOHN HAK-KYU, THE NEXT PRESIDENT OF KOREA?
OUTGOING GYEONGGI PROVINCE GOVERNOR MAKES HIS CASE

REF: SEOUL 1920

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Sohn Hak-kyu (GNP), outgoing Gyeonggi Province Governor and presidential hopeful, outlined his qualifications and vision for leading the ROK to the Ambassador June 29. Sohn currently trails other presidential hopefuls in the polls, but hopes to bolster his standing as the "progressive" conservative with a 100-day tour of Korea he will kick off on July 1. Sohn underscored that he understood the need for close U.S.-ROK relations, had a track record for increasing jobs, and comprehended globalization. Further, because of his dealings with North Korea through projects such as the North Korean Farm Village Modernization Project, he was best suited to manage one of the ROK's most sensitive relationships. END SUMMARY.

SOHN: THE "REFORM" CONSERVATIVE

2. (SBU) Gyeonggi Province Governor Sohn Hak-kyu (GNP) explained to the Ambassador during a June 29 lunch that he would begin a 100-day tour of Korea July 1, immediately after his tenure as governor, to "see what people want." During the tour, he planned to win over the middle-aged, young, and undecided voters who would determine the outcome of the 2007 presidential election. To become a truly advanced nation, the ROK needed to reform and maintain the values of conservatism. Toward that end, he said, reform-minded members of the Grand National Party (GNP) planned to put forward their own "surprise" candidate for the GNP chairmanship at the July 11 leadership convention. (NOTE: Younger, reform-minded members were responsible for putting former Rep. Oh Se-hoon into the Seoul mayoral race, usurping the party's bid against far more seasoned GNP politicians, and thus demonstrating their influence. On June 30, they nominated Kwon Young-se to run in the chairman's race. END NOTE.)

3. (SBU) While Sohn would not comment on the other presidential hopefuls, such as former Chairwoman Park Geun-hye and outgoing Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-bak, he implied he was the best candidate because of his proven leadership governing the most populous and most "important" province in Korea; his long and close ties with the U.S.; and his clear

vision for the ROK. Irrespective of gender, the next President needed to be a moral, capable individual with a vision -- someone who understood the world and global trends and could strengthen the ROK's competitiveness through technology and knowledge industries, Sohn said. He had an excellent track record of attracting businesses -- both foreign and domestic -- and creating jobs, thus demonstrating his ability to move Korea forward. (NOTE: As governor, Sohn has been credited with attracting foreign investment worth \$13.6 billion from 88 different firms to Gyeonggi and creating some 560,000 jobs. In April 2006, LG Philips launched operation of the world's largest flat panel plant in Paju. The new plant is expected to create over 90,000 jobs. END NOTE.)

U.S.-ROK RELATIONS

14. (C) Sohn acknowledged that U.S.-ROK relations could and should be better. He blamed President Roh for the poor state of bilateral relations, accenting that it was a shame Presidents Bush and Roh had not spoken in many months. He warmly remembered his work on the Pyeongtaek USFK base expansion and his role in aiding the reconciliation between the ROK and USFK after the 2002 accident involving two school girls. He hoped Korea would get accepted into the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) soon and explained that the visa problem affected people's daily lives and outlook toward the U.S. On the FTA, the Governor added that he hoped the U.S. could be more empathetic toward farmers' and movie industry workers' points of view but noted he was confident a KORUS FTA would be ratified by the National Assembly.

ENGAGING WITH THE DPRK

15. (C) Sohn said he had a vision to change North Korea, one village at a time. In the "North Korean Farm Village Modernization Project," which he helped to institute in 2005 in Dang Kok Ri south of Pyongyang, South Korean experts have been teaching new farming methods and sharing agricultural techniques with Dang Kok Ri farmers, providing aide to village schools and clinics, and supporting other basic infrastructure needs to improve rice production and raise the standard of living. The project was akin to the "New Village Movement," which contributed to the modernization of South Korea during the 1970s. Dang Kok Ri, Sohn said, has been so productive (doubling output) that the DPRK asked Gyeonggi Province to expand the venture ten-fold.

16. (C) Sohn also hoped to show South Koreans that economic engagement with the DPRK, without a political motive, was also financially beneficial to the ROK. He wanted to take advantage of the Kaesong Industrial Complex project by converting areas in Paju and Gimpo in Gyeonggi Province into free economic zones to increase trade.

17. (C) Sohn characterized his dealings with North Korea as very different from other South Koreans. He believed in economic engagement, but he would not let his vision get eclipsed by DPRK propaganda. For example, last fall he did not attend the harvest festival at Dang Kok Ri village because the DPRK insisted he attend the propagandistic "Arirang" festival. On his last visit in June, he succeeded in getting references to Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il excised from a student performance. The road to opening North Korea is through increased "inevitable" economic links, Sohn stated, but this should not be linked to political propaganda.

COMMENT

18. (C) Although Sohn has consistently trailed in polls behind GNP rivals Park and Lee, he is considered a serious contender because younger, reform-minded GNP members support him. Further, critics speculate a candidate as conservative as Lee or Park may not be able to win the presidency. Such

sentiments will help Sohn as he has positioned himself as a progressive but balanced and pragmatic politician. If recent polls are indicative of a trend, voters seem to be showing a strong preference for leaders who can address economic concerns and other issues in a pragmatic way. This was most evident in the May 31 regional elections, which dealt a severe blow to President Roh and the ruling Uri Party -- both seen as too ideological and removed from the day-to-day concerns of South Koreans. If Sohn's 100-day tour is a big hit, he could very well become a serious challenger to Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye for the GNP nomination. END COMMENT.

BIO INFORMATION ON SOHN HAK-KYU

¶9. (SBU) Born in 1947 in Gyeonggi Province, Sohn was elected governor in 2002. Prior to that, he was a member of the 14th, 15th, and 16th National Assemblies (1993-2002).

¶10. (SBU) Sohn was involved in the pro-democracy movement of the 1970s and 80s, taking leadership roles in politically active Christian organizations such as the Korea Special Missionary Committee for the Metropolitan Area (manager, 1973-77), the Korea National Council of Churches (manager, 1977-80; member of the Unification Committee, 1991), and the Institute for the Study of Korean Christian Social Issues (director, 1986-87). After earning his Ph.D. from Oxford University, Sohn taught international relations at various universities in the ROK, including Inha University (1989-90) and Sogang University (1990-93). In 1993, he won a seat in the National Assembly on the ticket of President Kim Young-sam's Democratic Liberal Party (DLP), forerunner of today's Grand National Party (GNP). He held a series of high-profile positions in the party, including chairman of the International Organizations Committee (1995), spokesman (1995), and chairman of the Policy Coordination Committee (1996). During his second term in the National Assembly, he was named Minister of Health and Welfare (1996-97). In 1998, he resigned from the Assembly to run for governor of Gyeonggi

Province; he was defeated then, but won in 2002.

¶11. (SBU) Sohn, who studied in the UK (1980-86) and was a visiting professor at George Washington University (1999-2000), speaks fluent English and has actively sought contact with successive U.S. Ambassadors. Sohn is married with two daughters. He enjoys golf.

VERSHBOW